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INFO RUEHRL/AMEMBASSY BERLIN PRIORITY 0511
RUEHKA/AMEMBASSY DHAKA PRIORITY 0347
RUEHIL/AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD PRIORITY 7330
RUEHKT/AMEMBASSY KATHMANDU PRIORITY 5445
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON PRIORITY 3966
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI PRIORITY 1266
RUEHNY/AMEMBASSY OSLO PRIORITY 4034
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO PRIORITY 3120
RUEHCG/AMCONSUL CHENNAI PRIORITY 7922
RUEHBI/AMCONSUL MUMBAI PRIORITY 5571
RUEHON/AMCONSUL TORONTO PRIORITY 0362
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK PRIORITY 0597
RUEHGV/USMISSION GENEVA PRIORITY 2260
RHHMUNA/HQ USPACOM HONOLULU HI PRIORITY
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY
RHEHAAA/NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 COLOMBO 001123

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DEPARTMENT FOR SCA/INS
MCC FOR D NASSIRY AND E BURKE

E.O. 12958: DECL: 08/14/2017
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [PHUM](#) [MOPS](#) [CE](#)
SUBJECT: SRI LANKA: PRIME MINISTER LASHES OUT AT UN UNDER
SECRETARY HOLMES

SIPDIS

REF: A. COLOMBO 1106
[1](#)B. COLOMBO 1036

Classified By: Ambassador Robert O. Blake, Jr., for reasons 1.4(b,d).

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY: UN Under Secretary General for Humanitarian Affairs John Holmes visited Sri Lanka from August 6-9, the first high-level UN visit to Sri Lanka in almost a year. Holmes met with senior Government officials, attended the first year anniversary of the killing of 17 Action Against Hunger workers, and visited Jaffna and Batticaloa to assess the humanitarian situation in the North. Holmes's visit was tightly controlled by the Government, including his access to NGOs and civil society groups in the North and East. His strong statements to the press at the end of the trip, including a comment that Sri Lanka is one of the most dangerous places in the world for aid workers, drew harsh criticism from the GSL. The restrictions imposed on Holmes are yet another example of the Government's recent trend toward restricting international access to independent sources of information in the North, and the latest in a series of attacks on foreigners who have been critical of GSL policies. End Summary.

[1](#)2. (C) Under Secretary General for Humanitarian Affairs John Holmes visited Sri Lanka from August 6-9, the first high-level UN visit to Sri Lanka in almost a year. Holmes met with senior Government officials including President Rajapaksa, Defense Secretary Gothabaya Rajapaksa, Senior Advisor to the President Basil Rajapaksa, Foreign Minister Rohitha Bogollagama and Foreign Secretary Palitha Kohona. Holmes attended the first-year anniversary of the killing of 17 local workers of the French NGO Action Against Hunger and visited Jaffna and Batticaloa to assess the humanitarian situation in the North and East.

Government Restricts Holmes's Access to NGOs and Media

13. (C) Holmes's visit was tightly controlled by the Government. The GSL restricted the media's access to Holmes until his press briefing in Colombo on August 9. He was denied permission to visit the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam's (LTTE) "capital" of Kilinochchi. At a dinner on August 7, he complained to Charge that his visit to Jaffna was of little use, since he was accompanied by military personnel the entire time (ref A). According to a letter to Holmes from the Centre for Policy Alternatives, a local think tank, the military commander in Jaffna held a meeting at the Jaffna military headquarters at Palali base, where he instructed NGOs and civil society groups not to brief Holmes on human rights issues. Many of these groups, the letter said, regretted their inability to meet with Holmes without the presence of military officials. The CPA letter noted that such steps to limit Holmes's access to information reaffirms international concerns about transparency and accountability of the Government on human rights and humanitarian issues.

Holmes's Statements Anger the GSL

14. (C) Holmes's strong statements to the press at the end of the trip drew harsh criticism from the GSL. During his press conference on August 9, and in a Reuters interview released after his departure, Holmes called on the Government to consider an international rights monitoring mission, ensure aid workers have adequate and secure access to people in need, and disarm the paramilitary Karuna faction. In the Reuters interview, he asserted that Sri Lanka was one of the

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most dangerous places in the world for humanitarian workers. Prime Minister Ratnasiri Wickremanayake, at an otherwise low-profile local government meeting outside Colombo, called Holmes's statements "uncivilized." Later, in a statement to parliament on August 13, he said that the GSL rejects Holmes's assertion that Sri Lanka is unsafe for humanitarian workers. He added that the GSL feels Holmes has "contributed to those who seek to discredit the Government and tarnish its international image" and that "a visit that was designed to build up confidence has been seriously affected by his interview." A Foreign Ministry media release on August 11 noted that Holmes had not raised concerns about the safety of aid workers in his Colombo meetings or during his press conference, and called his comments to Reuters "disingenuous."

15. (C) COMMENT: The conditions placed on Holmes's visit are consistent with other efforts by the Jaffna military authorities, in particular, to restrict access to independent sources of information on the human rights situation there. This has included moves to prevent interaction between this Embassy and key Jaffna contacts (ref b). The Government's vehement criticism of Holmes is reminiscent of other verbal attacks on foreigners who have been critical of GSL policies, such as UN Special Representative on Children and Armed Conflict Allan Rock. In retrospect, Holmes's placing his interview with Reuters under embargo until after his joint press appearance with Human Rights Minister Samarasinghe backfired by putting one of the key advocates for better human rights within the government in an embarrassing position. This provided the Prime Minister a justification for his tirade, and will not help Samarasinghe's standing within the Cabinet. Sadly, in one sense the Government is probably correct: Holmes's visit did little to strengthen cooperation between the GSL and the United Nations. If anything, the Government of Sri Lanka's aversion to surprise high-level criticism means it is now probably less likely to consider an international monitoring presence or further probes into human rights abuses.

BLAKE